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Liberalism and the empire

London

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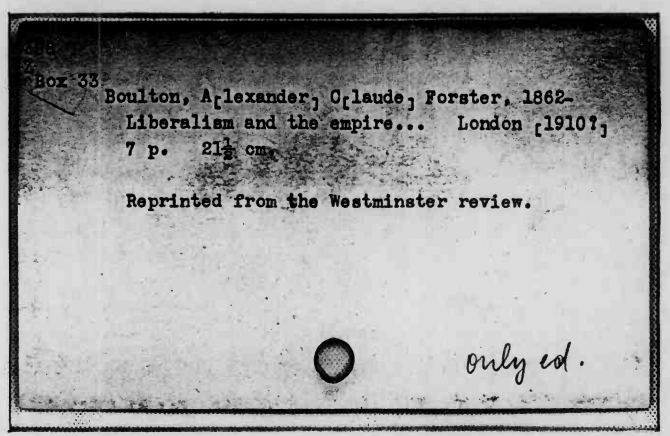
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Liberalism and The Empire.

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LIBERALISM AND THE EMPIRE.

THE attention of the public within the last few years has been almost entirely absorbed in questions of an Imperial character. The Jubilee of the Queen and the Egyptian Campaign have been object lessons to the man in the street, and have been made use of by the party in power as arguments to prove that the Conservatives are the true Imperialists and the founders and preservers of the Empire. In almost every party paper, on almost every party platform, Conservative writers and Conservative orators are to be found proclaiming their Imperialism, and by inference, if not by direct assertion, charging the Liberal Party with the policy of Little Englandism. How far all this is true the public are careless to investigate, and so the chief credit for the existence of the Empire is conceded to the Tories by at least that part of the public which is too much concerned in its own affairs to inquire into political questions for itself. It takes for granted that the Empire is expanding, and with it British prestige and commerce, and, as one party is always boasting of its Imperialism, and the other party is generally silent on this point, it is not surprising that the average man is ready to believe that the Tory policy is the policy which makes for Empire. And yet the truth is not far to seek, and when found is scarcely consistent with Tory pretensions. The search into history reveals the Liberals as the builders of the Empire, the Tories as the opponents of the policy which has made for Imperial Unity. Many things have contributed to the present condition of the Empire, and among them Conquest and Discovery play an important part. But in our search for truth these factors need little investigation. Every child is familiar with the figures which pass before us on the stage of history—figures who, by their bravery, their indomitable courage, skill and tenacity of purpose, have brought continents under British rule. But to conquer and add possession unto possession has ever been a leading trait in all great peoples, and it has been done before and by other nations. What has distinguished

the British nation from the Empires which have preceded it is the fact that we, and we alone, have evolved the system of self-government. Greece, Rome, Carthage, and Assyria were all in their day great States, and the Roman Empire dominated a greater part of the then known world than any nation either before or since. But all these States presupposed in their constitution the existence of a large mass of unenfranchised people at the base of their social pyramid. All of them regarded this as part of the necessary and eternal order of things, and in all of them, even the most democratic, citizenship, self-government, free speech, all the best part of the blessings of civilisation, were enjoyed by the classes and denied to the masses. And the consequence was that these great Empires one by one fell into decay. It was the absence of self-government extending throughout the whole social structure that destroyed them. It is the presence of that self-government which has made the British Empire strong, and is tending to our expansion and not to our decay.

"Rome is the lone mother of dead Empires."
"England is the living mother of free nations."

Had we continued to refuse the franchise to our own people and self-government to the Colonies, would we have had an Empire which is the admiration and envy of the civilised world? We would have been a Little England indeed, and our colonies would have been by this time independent States.

India we might have held as we hold it now—by the sword. But Canada, Australia, and South Africa would one by one have broken loose. On the American continent to-day there are two great Anglo-Saxon nations. To the south of the St. Lawrence, the great lakes, and the forty-ninth parallel of latitude lies the American Republic. To the north lies the Dominion of Canada. Can it be doubted that, if the same policy which has been pursued towards Canada since 1841 had been followed in the preceding century, Queen Victoria would not to-day have reigned over a territory stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean, from San Francisco to the Atlantic? Can it likewise be doubted that, if the same selfish policy which lost us half the American continent had been pursued towards Canada in 1841 that she, too, in desperation would have revolted from the rule of a tyrannical mother? Rebellion in both Upper and Lower Canada had broken out, and discontent was only allayed by the despatch of Lord Durham to enquire into the grievances of the Canadians. And these grievances were both apparent and real. Todd, in his work

on Government in the Colonies, gives us a picture of the Colonies in 1840. He says:

"The administration of public affairs in such of the British Colonies as were in the possession of representative institutions was undeniably in an unsatisfactory state."

"Under this policy the responsibility of government was centred absolutely and exclusively in the Governor. He was, indeed, assisted by an Executive Council nominated by the Crown and selected from the principal administrative officers in the Colony. But these functionaries, though accountable to the Crown for the faithful discharge of their respective official duties, were not answerable either individually or collectively for the result of the advice they might offer to the Governor. He consulted them at his discretion, and the responsibility of government in no way devolved upon them. This rested solely upon the Governor, and he was responsible only to the supreme authority of the Empire."

This state of things was intolerable to the Colonies. But so long as the reins of office were held by the Tories the appeals of the Colonists were in vain. But to Toryism at last succeeded Liberalism, the outcome of the great Reform Act of 1832. From that date down to 1874 the Liberal Party were almost continually in office, and it was during that period, the golden age of Liberalism, that the policy of governing the Colonies was entirely changed. And side by side with Colonial reform the policy of greater freedom to our people in England was extended. And the opposition to these two great and wise policies (self-government for the Colonies, and the extension of the franchise to the people of Great Britain) has come from the Tories, who, like the classes in the States of old, were in favour of keeping the masses in subjection. The demand for enfranchisement was met with the cry that its advocates were revolutionary miscreants, who were aiming at the overthrow of the throne and constitution. In reality they were the saviours of society, and time has proved that with every extension of the franchise prosperity has broadened and security deepened.

The appeals of the Colonies for responsible government were made in vain to Tory ears. Their policy was to govern the Colonies in the interests of England and not of the Colonists. But so far back as the time of Charles James Fox the Liberal Party was opposed to this policy. Fox, who may be said to have been the founder of Liberalism as distinguished from Whiggism, should be ever famous for his far-sighted declaration on Colonial policy. "I am convinced," he said, "that the only method of retaining distant Colonies with advantage is to enable them to

govern themselves," and it was on this policy that Liberals from that time onward conducted their administration of the Colonies. That Fox was right is a matter that admits of no doubt. Previous to the grant of self-government we know that the Colonies were in continual revolt. Rebellion followed rebellion in our British American possessions, and it was only with the grant of Home Rule that those Colonies at last settled down to peace, progress and prosperity. The grant of Home Rule to Canada, Australia and South Africa was the gift of successive Liberal statesmen[1] in the face of strong opposition from the Tories.

Todd, in the work before quoted, says:

"It was during the administration of Lord Melbourne, 1835 to 1841, that a remedy was first devised for Colonial grievances, whereby the prevailing discontent in the Colonies was removed. This was effected by the wise adaptation of British constitutional principles to Colonial policy, and by the gradual introduction into each dependency, according to its political condition and circumstances, of the principle of self-government in all matters of local concern, coupled with the unreserved application in regard to the same of the constitutional maxim of ministerial responsibility to the Colonial Assembly."

Let us glance for a moment at the attitude assumed towards this policy by the founder of Conservatism and Tory Imperialism, Lord Beaconsfield. Speaking at the Crystal Palace on June 24, 1872, he said:

"Gentlemen, there is another and second great object of the Tory Party. If the first is to maintain the institutions of the country, the second is, in my opinion, to uphold the Empire of England. If you look at the history of this country since the advent of Liberalism—forty years ago—you will find that there has been no effort so continuous, so subtle, supported by so much energy and carried on with so much ability and acumen, as the attempt of Liberalism to effect the disintegration of the Empire of England.

"And, gentlemen, of all its efforts this is the one which has been nearest to success. Statesmen of the highest character, writers of the most distinguished ability, the most organised and efficient means have been employed in the endeavour. Well, that result was nearly accomplished. When those subtle views were adopted by the country under the plausible plea of granting self-government to the Colonies, I confess that I myself thought that the tie was broken. Not that I, for one, object to self-government. I cannot conceive how our distant Colonies can have their affairs administered except by self-government. But self-government, in my opinion, when it is conceded, ought to have been conceded as part of a great policy of Imperial consolidation. It ought to have been accompanied by an Imperial tariff, by securities for the people of

[1] Responsible Government was introduced into Canada in 1841, the Maritime Provinces in 1848, Australia in 1850, Tasmania in 1854-5, New South Wales in 1856, Queensland in 1860, Western Australia in 1875, Cape Colony in 1850-3.

England for the enjoyment of the unappropriated lands which belonged to the Sovereign as their trustee, and by a military code which should have precisely defined the means and the responsibilities by which the Colonies should have been defended, and by which, if necessary, this country should call for aid from the Colonies themselves."

This was Disraeli's idea of self-goverument. An Imperial tariff, regulated as it must have been, from Downing Street; a military code by which the Colonies should be kept in control, and the retention by Great Britain of the unappropriated lands in the Colonies. Such a policy as this would have been accepted by no self-respecting Colony. Disraeli regarded the grant of complete self-government as an attempt to effect the disintegration of the Empire. Liberal statesmen regarded it rather as a means of preserving that Empire. Disraeli regarded the Colonies after they were granted Home Rule as a burden, and he wrote in 1852 to Lord Malmesbury, then Foreign Secretary: "These wretched Colonies will all be independent, too, in a few years, and are a millstone round our necks." Contrast this with what Professor Goldwin Smith, at one time Professor of History at Oxford, said the other day in the *Times*. Writing of the old Liberals of the mid century, he says:—"Contempt for the Colonies was never expressed or felt in our circle." To sum up, what then has been the effect of this Liberal doctrine of Home Rule? With the grant of self-government, peace, loyalty, and prosperity have been brought about, and to-day we find a United Empire, held together by slender ties, it is true, but ties which are, nevertheless, the stronger because they are so lightly held.

The Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty witnessed a sight unparalleled in the history of the world. Representatives of the Colonies came from the four corners of the earth to bear witness to their loyalty to the Empire upon which the sun never sets. Can it be doubted that the course of this deep current of loyalty was first stirred into existence by the acts of Liberal statesmen, rather than by the Tories, who sat feebly on the banks wringing their hands as the irresistible tide of freedom swept by? As Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the Liberal Prime Minister of Canada, has said, "the Colonies are loyal because the colonies are free." Where is it that, after all, the great strength of the Empire resides? Not in the great military dependencies of India, Egypt and the Far East. No! it is in the free communities which have sprung from these shores and which have carried to the ends of the earth the name and fame of Britain and the strength of British character. That their loyalty has been proved is a matter of history. That they

are ready and willing to share in the defence of the Empire cannot be gainsaid.

Years ago Lord Lytton, in addressing a gathering in London on the Australian Colonies, spoke of the support which might one day be accorded to the motherland by the Colonies:

"You, gentlemen of Australia," said the brilliant orator, "will one day have great cities where you have now villages, and your harbours then will be full of ships. In that day it may be that England may be in danger and the military and despotic Governments of Europe may rise in their might to crush the mother of free nations. If that day should ever come, then to her rescue across the broad ocean ships will come thick and fast, among which the cry will be, 'While Australia lasts, England shall not perish.'"*

It is to the legislation of Liberal Government that the unity of this great Empire is mainly due. More than any other factor in the maintenance of the Empire has been the policy of electoral reform in these islands and the extension of self-government in the Colonies. Without the first, Liberalism would have been impotent, and without Liberalism self-government would at least have been postponed beyond that time when Colonial forbearance could have been relied on.

These arguments are apparently unanswerable, but they are met by present-day Tories with the reply that, whatever have been the results of Liberal policy, such results were not foreseen by the authors of that policy. The Liberal Party are charged with having built better than they knew, and with having granted Home Rule with the express intention of casting the Colonies adrift. This again is an unfounded charge. The men responsible for the Colonial policy of self-government were Earl Grey and Lord John Russell. In the former's book, *The Colonial Administration of Lord John Russell*, we find statements which emphatically reject the theory of casting the Colonies adrift. Earl Grey says:—

"I consider then that the British Colonial Empire ought to be maintained, principally because I do not consider it would be justified in throwing off the responsibility it has incurred by the acquisition of this dominion, and because I believe that much of the power and influence of this country depends upon its having large Colonial possessions in different parts of the world. The possession of a number of steady and faithful allies in various quarters of the globe will surely be admitted to add greatly to the strength of any nation,

* Lord Lytton's prophecy has in some respects come true, Australia and Canada having sent contingents to South Africa to assist the Mother Country in her struggle with the Boer Republics.

while no alliance between independent States can be so close and intimate as the connection which unites the Colonies to the United Kingdom as part of the British Empire. Nor ought it to be forgotten that the power of a nation does not depend merely on the amount of physical force it can command, but rests in no small degree upon opinion and moral influence; in this respect British power would be diminished by the loss of our Colonies to a degree which it would be difficult to estimate. Hence, if it is an advantage, not for the sake of domineering over other countries, but with a view to our own security, to form part of a powerful nation rather than of a weak one, it seems to follow that the tie which binds together all the different and distant portions of the British Empire, so that their united strength may be wielded for their common protection, must be regarded as an object of extreme importance to the interests of the mother country and her dependencies."

Looking back on the past and considering the triumphant result of Liberal policy, we can surely see the distinguishing points in the policy of parties. The idea of Empire was with the Tories the domination of a central government exercising its patronage in Colonial appointments and governing through these favoured officials. The idea of Empire with the Liberals was Empire by Home Rule; and, looking into the future and profiting by the experience of the past, should we not rather expect to see still further links or union which make for true Imperialism, forged by Liberals rather than Tories—Liberals who have broken down the shackles which cramped our trade and commerce, who have given expansion to the Empire, and who have breathed into these distant communities the breath of free, self-governing institutions?

A. C. Forster Boulton.

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